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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S ISSUES AMBASSADOR MARKS BANGLADESH'S PROGRESS AND  
REMAINING OBSTACLES

Summary  
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1. (SBU) The recent visit to Dhaka by Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Vermeer highlighted the need for Bangladesh's leaders to work together more cohesively to further advance the status of women here. Ambassador Vermeer's meetings with government officials, civil society leaders and businesswomen demonstrated that women's lives have greatly improved in the last 30 years. However, efforts are still needed to protect women's rights and enforce legal protections for women, increase economic opportunities, improve health conditions and foster political empowerment. Ambassador Vermeer found no dearth of ideas for addressing these challenges; one of the main obstacles to progress on women's issues appears to be a lack of cohesion among the many actors working on women's issues.

Opposition leader outlines past progress  
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2. (SBU) Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Vermeer visited Bangladesh November 10-12 and discussed the status of women with a range of actors, including government officials, Parliamentary leaders, members of civil society, aid beneficiaries and businesswomen. (NOTE: We will report septel on meetings with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. END NOTE.) Begum Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition and head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), outlined the progress made on women's issues while she was Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996 and from 2001 to 2006.

3. (SBU) After Ambassador Vermeer noted the creativity and innovativeness of Bangladesh's civil society, including non-governmental organizations like BRAC and Grameen, Begum Zia responded that employment and education opportunities for women and girls in Bangladesh increased under her leadership. She noted that education was an important tool for preventing child marriage, which is still a significant problem in Bangladesh. Providing food incentives such as rice and wheat to poor families to keep their daughters in school was a unique way to address the problem. She also mentioned technical training institutes for girls that started under her regime. She listed more jobs and health care as her top priorities for women. Ambassador Vermeer and Begum Zia also discussed global climate change and food security, including USG initiatives in these areas; they agreed women could play a strong role in addressing climate change and food security in Bangladesh. Begum Zia's colleagues pointed out that if problems related to natural disasters, climate change, and starvation persisted, how could we focus on women's empowerment? On climate change, they lamented the lack of preparedness for earthquakes in Bangladesh. They also noted that they are looking to their developed partners for technical assistance on climate change.

Women MPs welcome a greater political role  
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14. (U) At a lunch with women Members of Parliament, Ambassador Verveer listened to the stories of the legislators, most of whom were serving in Parliament for the first time. One MP from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party spoke movingly about her experience transitioning from the "kitchen to Parliament," noting it was the first time she was speaking to a crowd like this. She ran in her husband's place, since he was ineligible to run, but her tale showed she was more than just a figurehead. She described how she took her experience discussing politics over the kitchen table with family members and constituents and translated that into a successful campaign for Parliament. Verveer urged the MPs to use their shared experiences as women to forge ties across political parties so that they could work together on issues of importance to women including education, health and economy.

#### USG contributing to women's health care

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15. (U) Ambassador Verveer highlighted the importance of maternal and child health in development when she visited a community health clinic supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). At the Smiling Sun clinic, one of 319 such clinics throughout Bangladesh, Ambassador Verveer met mothers with their newborn babies, born by Caesarian section. Clinics like Smiling Sun ensured that women with high-risk pregnancies had a better chance of delivering healthy babies, Verveer observed. Verveer also discussed how the clinics community health workers could do more to educate mothers about preventive health measures and explored ways to reach out to the vast majority of women who actually are not served by clinics or hospitals and are usually confined to home deliveries.

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#### Progress needed on women's rights

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16. (SBU) Civil society leaders told Ambassador Verveer that while Bangladesh had made great strides in improving the lot of women, much more needed to be done to guarantee womens' rights here. At a roundtable discussion with leaders from human rights non-governmental organizations, the leaders agreed that the legal framework protecting women was strong in Bangladesh. Enforcement of these laws was weak, however, according to round table participants.

Many of the participants agreed that there was a serious lack of political will and the judiciary and police needed reform. They noted that the government needed to be held accountable and more women were needed in politics at the local level. They said many women lacked access to the judicial system and must rely on informal arbitration by village officials who might be uneducated or prejudiced. Many pointed out that family laws needed to be modified and noted the challenges in implementing certain articles of UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

17. (SBU) Representatives of labor groups told Ambassador Verveer that Bangladesh's booming apparel industry provided many job opportunities, but wages and working conditions remained unacceptable. Workers often had no maternity leave, no set minimum wage and faced sexual harassment. There were only a few unions in the garment industry and if they exist, since they were headed by men, it was very challenging for women to receive assistance. The labor leaders said garment workers lacked adequate representation, which made it easy for individuals with political or criminal motives to stir up worker unrest. According to the labor code, unions have to register with the government to form a labor union, which the government is often reluctant to accept. According to the activists, another challenge in addressing these injustices is that the government and factory owners are often the same, since over thirty members of Parliament own garment factories.

18. (SBU) Roundtable participants were short on ideas for ways civil society could mobilize to achieve more progress on women's rights; they merely said the GOB needed to do more. The head of a shelter for trafficked women and children did praise the GOB for its commitment to tackling trafficking in persons as the national and

local level.

Grameen Bank continues its success

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¶9. (SBU) A visit to Grameen Bank proved that micro-credit continues to thrive in Bangladesh. Ambassador Verveer met with more than 30 women and students, including young men, who had transformed their lives thanks to Grameen credit. Many of the previously-destitute women had worked with Grameen for the last 20 years, starting with tiny loans equivalent to less than \$20 to buy cows or sell rice. Now their loans exceed \$1,500, and the women have built and furnished homes, helped their husbands find work, and expanded their businesses. Some of the women participated in a renewable energy program called Grameen Shakti, which is supported by the U.S. Government through USAID. One woman, a tailor, described how her home-based solar energy system ran lights, a cellphone charger, an oven and a television. The system allowed her to work from home and take on more business since she could now work at night. When Ambassador Verveer asked who among these Grameen loan recipients had cellphones, everyone raised their hands. All the women also had their own savings accounts with the equivalent of at least \$800 in savings.

¶10. (SBU) The students told Ambassador Verveer that thanks to Grameen education loans they now studied at college and hoped to start their own business, enter government service or continue their studies abroad. These students said they would not be in college without Grameen, since their parents, most of whom were uneducated, could not afford to pay for higher education.

Entrepreneurs say economic opportunity key to success

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¶11. (SBU) A lunch with the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Bangladesh illustrated that businesswomen here are not just active at the micro level. Women working in the fields of handicrafts, export-import, garment manufacturing and animal health agreed that economic opportunity was key to women's empowerment. The businesswomen told Ambassador Verveer that access to credit and markets, as well as technical expertise remained among the challenges they faced in growing their businesses. Many of them said they were only able to succeed thanks to the support of their family. They also registered concerns about extremism, too much

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government interference in business and poor implementation of laws. Several participants agreed that women needed to "speak with one voice" when lobbying for change.

Comment

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¶12. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer observed that Bangladesh had changed greatly, mostly for the better, since her first visit here in 1995. (NOTE: She accompanied then-First Lady Hillary Clinton to Bangladesh on that occasion. END NOTE.) The range of women activists and their ideas was impressive. As often happens in Bangladesh, however, fragmentation of individuals and groups appears to prevent good ideas from becoming reality. Government, business and civil society need to work together better to continue Bangladesh's substantial progress on women's issues. Mission Dhaka will continue to look for ways to facilitate concrete actions, particularly in priority areas like food security, global climate change, health and governance.

¶13. (U) S/GWI cleared this cable.

MORIARTY